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Brilliant Britney

Pop icon. Soda-pop diva. Justin's galpal. Snake charmer. By now, we're all well acquainted with the many incarnations of Britney Spears. Or are we?

By Joey Guerra

Spear's third album, the appropriately diva-esque titled *Britney*, found the world's biggest teen superstar tinkering a bit with her hit-making formula. (Actually, the Kentwood, La., native turned 20 in December.) She teamed up with impossibly hip producers the Neptunes (Mary J. Blige, Janet Jackson) and Rodney Jerkins (Whitney Houston, Brandy) for a good dose of street credibility, and enlisted moody songstress Dido as co-writer for "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman," the album's second single.

Now, get ready for Britney Spears – movie star. This month brings the release of *Crossroads*, Spears' first big-screen vehicle. The \$10 million drama was directed by Tamra Davis (*Guncrazy*, *Bad Girls*, *Billy Madison*) and follows three long-time school galpals on a road trip to California. It co-stars Anson Mount (*Urban Legends: Final Cut*), Taryn Manning (*Get Real*) and Zoe Saldana (*Center Stage*). Dan Akroyd and *Sex and the City*'s Kim Cattrall pop up as Spears' difficult-to-deal-with parents.

"It's a teen movie, but it's a teen movie dealing with real issues," Spears said during a recent phone chat, as boyfriend Justin Timberlake – you know, that guy from that boy band – sat quietly by her side. "That's why we chose it."

Given Spears' unbreakable streak atop the entertainment totem pole over the past three years since the release of her ... *Baby One More Time* album, choices are something she has plenty of. Among the recent ones: a live HBO concert from the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas; a duet with Michael Jackson during his TV tribute special; a multi-million-dollar Pepsi campaign; a second *Saturday Night Live* appearance Feb. 3; and her 32-date North American tour. (By the way, all you Britheads itching for a local date can breathe easy. Spears promises a stop in H-Town later this year.)

Crossroads is a refreshing pace-changer for the young star, who had big-screen dreams even before she became an MTV lightning rod. She lists Audrey Hepburn, Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock and Meg Ryan among her favorite big-screen heroines.

"Honestly, I've been on the road for almost three years, and I was like, 'I need a change.'" Spears admitted. "We were getting a bunch of scripts in, but nothing I really wanted to put my name all over.

"I came up with the idea to do our own production company and try to make up our own scripts, and that's exactly what we did. I got a writer (Shonda Rhimes) to come in and collaborate on it, and it happened."

Up until now, Spears' acting skills have been relegated to vamping it up in videos such as "Stronger" and "I'm a Slave 4 U" and a pre-teen stint on the *Mickey Mouse Club*. Early buzz on *Crossroads*, however, pegs Spears as a (gasp!) capable actress. Critics and audiences will ultimately decide her big-screen fate when the movie opens Feb. 15. in theaters across the country.

As far as Spears is concerned, working on the project was a reward in and of itself. Rest assured, however, that a hit will only add to her pop princess glimmer.

"It was a good break for me. I learned a lot, and I met a lot of cool people. It was a lot of fun," said Spears, a hint of enthusiasm peeking through her surprisingly soft-spoken demeanor. "The director, Tamra Davis, is a woman, and I had two weeks to spend with her before we even started shooting. She made me feel really comfortable before I even went in, so that was cool."

The pic was shot between March and May of last year, a much calmer pace than what Spears is accustomed to in the music world, which has her zipping from city to city – and sometimes country to country – in the shimmy of a sequined bra.



"It was totally different from what I do on the road. Seriously, movie stars have it made. They do!" Spears said with a giggle. "You go on set, you do your thing, you come off, and you just sit around. Being on the road – the music business, I think personally – is a lot harder."

Not that Spears is having too much trouble with her primary career choice. Her first two albums, ... *Baby One More Time* and *Oops ... I Did It Again*, have sold 20 million units combined. *Britney*, the third album, entered the charts at No. 1, making Spears the first solo female performer in the history of The Billboard 200 to have her first three albums debut at No 1.

Spears' latest effort is not revolutionary, but it is a marked departure from previous releases. The slinky swagger of "I'm a Slave 4 U" and "Boys" is genuinely surprising, and Spears lets loose on the joyous, Janet Jackson-ish "Anticipating." She even co-wrote five of the album's 12 tracks, something the teen queen has been wanting to do for awhile.

"I kinda had it in my head before I started recording that I wanted to do that," Spears said. "It wasn't too forced. I couldn't get in the studio sometimes. I wouldn't come up with anything (other times), and then sometimes I'd come in and we would (come up with lots of ideas). It just really depended on what we were feeling at the time."

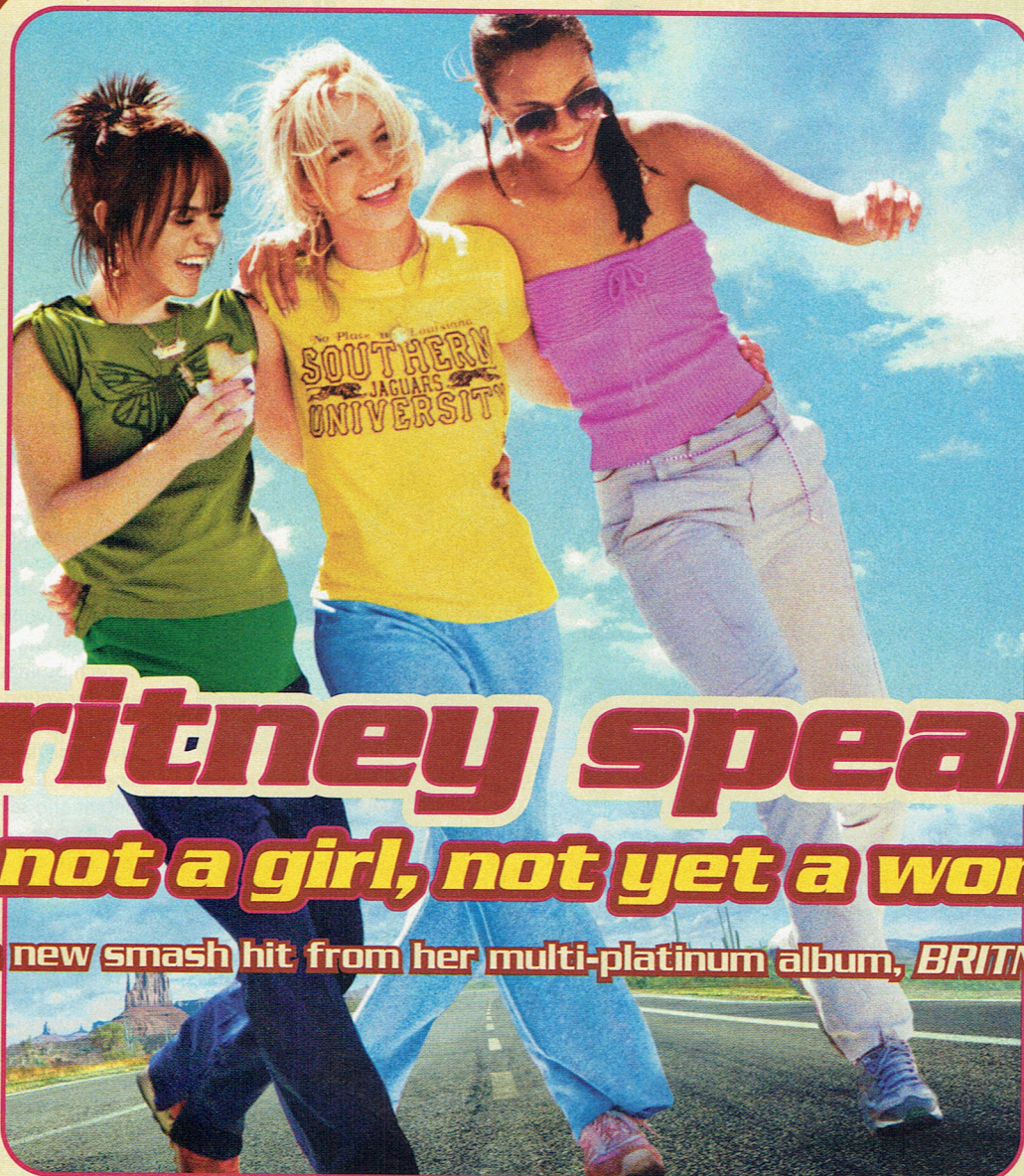
Something Spears really is feeling is her new single, "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman." The song, co-written by Dido, mirrors Spears' transition into adulthood and is featured in *Crossroads* along with another track, "Overprotected."

"I think we just kind of all knew," Spears said of her immediate identification with "Not a Girl." "Some songs just really stand out when you hear them, and we just kinda knew that was probably gonna be the one."

Along with her current single and movie debut, 2002 is shaping up as a Britney kind of year. This month alone, look for Spears' new Pepsi commercial to debut during the Feb. 3 Super Bowl; a performance of "Not a Girl" on the Feb. 9 All-Star Game; and the release of Britney Spears: Live From Las Vegas Feb. 12. Spears will also co-host the MTV Mardi Gras Special with Carson Daly and has signed on to play herself in *Austin Powers In Goldmember*, the next installment of Mike Myers' spy spoof. The movie is scheduled to hit theaters July 26.

All that exposure undoubtedly incites a few naysayers in the world according to Brit, but the planet's most popular pop artist takes it all in stride.

"I just kind of know that it goes along with what I do, you know?" Spears said of the inevitable criticism that comes with stardom. "As long as the fans are happy, it doesn't matter." ©



britney spears

i'm not a girl, not yet a woman

the new smash hit from her multi-platinum album, **BRITNEY**

Video Directed by Wayne Isham

Look for Britney Spears in her first major motion picture release, **Crossroads**

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 NBA All-Star Jam 'N' Read, February 9
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